WAITING
Luke 1:67-79
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In the Gospel according to Luke, there are several stories that preceed the birth of Jesus. Luke, alone among the Gospel writers, mentions them. They include the annunciation to Mary by the Angel of the Lord that she will bear a son: Mary's response, known to us as "The Magnificat" - "My soul magnifies theLord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden...": and then the long and rather complicated story of Zechariah and Elizabeth - and their soon-to-be-born son, who would be named John.

It's a long and involved preface to what really a-pears to be the beginning of the story - the birth of Jesus: and we have to assume that Luke included all this material for a reason. I thought about that this week - having before simply ignored most of the first chapter of Luke: and I would like to explore it with you this morning under the topic, "Waiting". But first let's refresh our memories.

In the 5th verse of the first chapter of Luke we are intrudced to a very interesting couple: Zechariah, an old priest, and his aged and barren wife, Elizabeth. Their childlessness had become over the years, a matter of deep concern. They were long past the time when conception ordinarily occurs: and yet old Zechariah continued to pray fervently that he would be given a child, and that his wife might be spared that special Hebrew stigma described negatively and coldly as "Barreness".

One day, as he took his priestly turn burning incense at the altar Zechariah had a vision: his wife would conceive and bear a son tobe named John. When Zechariah emerged from the temple to bless the people he was speechless - an appropriate response to such a dramatic experience - except that his speechlessness extended throughout the period of Elizabeth's pregnancy.

Luke describes further a similar annunciation to May: a strange meeting between Elizabeth and Mary - kinswomen he tells us; and the fact that Elizabeth recognized the tremendous significance of Mary's pregnancy.

When Elizabeth's infant son was born her friends rejoiced. And when she and her still speechless husband took him to the Temple on the 8th day for circumcision, everyone assumed that he would be named after his father. Elizabeth protested and when Zechariah was consulted he asked for a tablet and wrote: "His name is John." Suddenly he was able to speak again and he said quite a bit. His words are our New Testament Lesson this

morning, found in Luke 1:68-79.

THE NEW TESTAMENT LESSON

There's a lot going on during the Christmas season. In terms of time alone, I don't know anyone who does not feel pressed: there are more things to accomplish before December 25 than there are hours in the days which remain. And so it's a little frantic and our frenzy of activity tends to hide something else that's going on: something deep and difficult to explain; common and yet so individually personal that we can't always assign words to it. There is something about the season that gets to us; for some reason normal every-day emotions are amplified. Lonliness can be unbearable at Christmas: love is more intense: generosity is obviously more real: pain is more painful: grief more depressing. We lve with all of these - but at Christmas we feel them more deeply. Holding a child is something special to me at Christmas - I'm not sure why, but it is. And I want to do it as much as I can. Babies look more beautiful to us - even puppies are cuter when they are related to Christmas. It's almost as if our intellects - our spirits - all our emotions are on edge-raw-sensitive.

Christmas arouses even the most dormant emotionally = Ebenezer Scrooge, for instance, because Christmas is about some of the deepest human hopes and dreams and experiences. And beneath it all is the very real human experience of waiting. Now, ordinarily we would not assign much significance to waiting. I want, however, to suggest that it is a "loaded" word theologically.

Zechariah and Elizabeth waited all their lives for a son. And when the son was given it punctuated for them a reality far greater than the birth itself. Somehow the birth of John meant that the waiting was over - not only the waiting for a child, but also the waiting for God to act. "IT HAS HAPPENED", Zecharich proclaimed: I not only have a son, but now there is light in our darkness and peace.

The story of Zechariah and Elizabeth is a prototype, really, of the entire Biblical narrative. For the Bible is full of people waiting. The Bible spans thousands of years of history, and most of that time is taken up in waiting: the Hebrew tribes waiting for years in Egyptian slavery: the same tribes wandered for forty years through the Sinai desert, waiting to settle finally in a land of their own: centuries later we see them waiting again - this time as captives in Babylon - waiting for deliverance and freedom:

in the words of the prophets we sense a waiting over the centures for God's untimate act of redemption - the coming of the Messiah: and to bring it immediately up to date - those same people waiting from the year 70 AD until 1947 - dispersed through out the world - pushed into ghettoes - concentration camps and finally gas chambers - waiting for a restoration - a home - freedom and life.

Waiting is no small matter: it is certainly more significant than passing time in the context of theology. And the common thread between that and our own experience is that much of human life - our lives - may be called waiting.

That thought occured to me on Wednesday night as I sat in front of the television sharing John Chancelor's frustration, as we waited for the blast-off. IT OCCURED TO ME, AS WELL, that second only to "we'll see" my most frequent verbal transaction with my own children is "wait".

Waiting is an early human experience. Children wait to go to school, wait impatiently for the years to bring them to the first date, driver's license, graduation, marriage. As I look back on it now much of the co-lege years were invested in waiting to get out. We wait for a better job, for children, for a new house. Sometimes - many times - life feels like it's standing still - and we find ourselves waiting - and not knowing what it is we are waiting for. We wait for retirement - for freedom and liesure: and one of the new problems brought about by extended life expectancy is how to prevent people in homes for the aged from doing nothing but waiting for death.

Waiting is what divides generations. My parents could and did wait - I had trouble waiting - and I sense that my children can't and won't wait - for material goods, furniture, cars, houses, but also for peace and justice and integrity. A whole era in our nation's life is defined in a book title, "Why We Can't Wait", by Martin Luther King, Jr.

All of that is happening on the surface of our lives. And beneath the surface, I believe, there is a deeper waiting - a profoundly theological waiting symbolized by the image of Israel waiting in Egypt, in the desert inBabylon: a profoundly theological waiting verbalized by the old priest Zechariah in terms of this child bring "light to all who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

Helmut Thielicke, a German theologian, suggests that to be human is to wait - and that men are waiting for the dark and incomprehensible to be cleared up. I'm not sure that's

adequate but I do know that this philosophic sense of waiting for something is an important theme in literature.

Samuel Beckett in his play "Waiting for Godot", suggests that there is something for which all men wait, and without which life has no meaning. Two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, wait day in and day out for Godot - who never appears. In their waiting they talk nonsense, inconsequentials, just chatter. If Godot would only come they would know what to do next. But Godot does not come and the viewer is left with the dismal suggestion that nothing really matters: that human life is really nothing more than the empty patter of two tramps.

In Franz Kafka's "The Trial", the main character who is known only as "K", is on trial. But he doesn't know why - and he never finds out. Having waiting and struggled for an answer he is finally executed - and it comes almost as a blessed relief.

Arthur Miller, in "The Death of A Salesman" tells the depressing story of a small-time salesman who spends his whole life waiting for something great to happen. Waiting is what keeps him from going: and when it becomes clear that nothing great is ever going to happen to him he begins to come apart at the seams, and finally takes his own life.

Waiting is an important Biblical and Theological idea. It is reflected in secular literature and drama. And when we are completely candid I think we will see that it is one of the most important realities in our own experience.

For we, too, are waiting: perhaps, as Thielicke suggests, for the riddle of evil to be resolved, but more realistically, I think, for something we can't quite express: something as vague as Godot, something as important as Willie Loman's dram. We are waiting for "it" to happen,even though we don't know what "it" is.

I'm inclined to call it what old Zechariah call it - when it happened to him: namely salvation. And by that I mean some sense that there is a God: some sense that life does have meaning: some sense of wholeness, at-homeness in the world: some sense of self-acceptance: some sense that our relationships with our wives and husbands and children and parents and loved ones are permanent, that their death or our own does not terminate those relationships; some sense that death is not the final answer to our questions.

That's what I mean by salvation: that's what we're waiting for: that's the content of Israel's longling for the Messiah: that's what is behind and beheath the universal human experience of waiting.

And here comes old Zechariah saying that the birth of his son John, and the birth of another child for whom John will serve as the forefunner is the signed that "it" has happened: the waiting is over: salvation is here: there is light in the darkness, the shadow of death has been banished, and peace -wholeness - "shalow" is now a possibility.

That's how we Christians understand the event that happened in Bethleham of Judea. But you know, strangely, the goodness of the Good News spills over into the lives of thers, others who wait, others who do not call themselves Christians, who have no particular theological understanding of the Christmas event, but who nevertheless snese that because of this - because of this strange birth - the waiting is over.

Now, there is nothing in the Bible, and nothing in our experience, that guarantees that a man is going to sense that 24 hours a day, every day. Some expressions of the Church try to have it that way, but not very honestly. To the contray the baby about whom Zechariah got so excited grew up and one day had to send a message to Jesus asking if he really were the one or should they be looking for another. Everyday is not Christmas - even in the Bible. It happens only occassionally, with a lot of waiting in between.

But every now and then there is a hint - a break-through - in the highly charged atmosphere of Advent, in the faces of singing children, in the words of abeloved carol, or for me - in those moments when I hold my own child, and know deeply within myself that the waiting is over, that "it' has happened.

Here again the words of that singularly fortunate first man who sensed what I have been trying to describe: old Zecharian, not many years from death, his voice returned at the birth of a son

> "Blessed by the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.....
>
> And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most high..... to give knowledge of salvation to his people.
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> to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death: to guide our feet into the way of peace."

AMEN